

The Spiritual Cliff

Shepherd's Grace Church

December 29, 2012

Luke 2:41-52

⁴¹Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴²And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety."⁴⁹He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰But they did not understand what he said to them. ⁵¹Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵²And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor (Also Read Colossians 3: 12-17)

Merry Christmas! I have not had the opportunity to say that to all of you yet, but I do hope each of you had the opportunity to spend some time with family and friends during the season. I know the holidays can be a great time of reunion and family renewal. I also know the holidays can be a time of painful reminder as we remember Christmas past and loved ones who are no longer present. My prayer is that as we celebrate, we remember and we experience the old and the new. Each year Christmas offers the opportunity to believe again! It offers the opportunity to recall the times that God draws near, and the times that we are still waiting, watching, wondering what God is about to do! During this Christmas season, rejoice regardless of your situation, for the Creator of the universe has chosen to bring salvation to you!

The way that salvation comes may seem somewhat strange this Sunday. Just last Tuesday, Jesus was born. We saw him lying in a manger while the cattle were lowing. We watched as the shepherds drew near. We marveled with all those who were around as they told us of the way the baby had been made known to them. Now, just a few days later, we find the child is already 12! Where did the time go! Why the rush to make him grow up? What is the purpose?

Our confusion may be heightened even more next week when we jump back to the house at Bethlehem for the visit of the wise men. This morning, and even next Sunday we may be inclined to ask why the

story is told out of order. I believe we should not be surprised at the order in which the story is revealed to us. We serve a God who is not bound by time or space. God can break in to our present from His future at any point God chooses. The choice to move forward and backward in time only serves to heighten our awareness of the awesome power of God to make known to us what we need to know about God when we need to know it! Today, we need to know about Jesus the boy. It is important to know this part of the story so we can fully appreciate that which is to come. In this story, we are invited, even demanded to ask questions. For those who are reading this message, it might be appropriate to re-read the scripture now. What questions arise in your mind?

The story of Jesus' youth is unique to all the New Testament. There is a similar parallel in 1Samuel in the Hebrew Bible, which I think Luke has in mind as he writes his Gospel story, but there is no other reference in any of the writing by New Testament authors. Those of us who read this passage in the 21st century will want to wonder why there are not more details about the young Jesus. If this story were being written in our time, we would expect details of little league football and baseball. We would expect soccer statistics and results of speech and debate tournaments. (Surely with Jesus' quick mind and wit he would have undoubtedly been a great debater!) That, however is not the case for writing in Luke's time.

In Biblical times, autobiographies demanded only one, or at the most a couple of short stories about youth to illustrate the authenticity of the subject. Luke's desire was to write just such an authoritative account. Luke 1: 1-4 clearly spells out this purpose. It would have been out of character to include more information, so now our question turns to "why include this information?" That is exactly the question I believe God wants us to raise and to answer this morning. There is a specific purpose to including this story and God wants us to know it.

So what questions came to your mind as you re-read the text? Haven't done it yet? Do it now! What questions come up? Is your first question one like this: "What kind of a snot-nosed brat are we dealing with in this gospel?" How dare he speak to his mother and father in such an insolent tone. How dare he say, "did you not know" when clearly they had spent 3 days not knowing. That might be the first place I would go. The boy has run off from his parents and when they find him he cops a "tude." Should he not be severely disciplined by his parents for such a disrespectful and inconsiderate response?

Then perhaps you remember there is only one parent present. Joseph is a step parent. I notice in this passage that Joseph is silent through out the entire transaction. Mary is a biological parent. She is comfortable speaking out. Joseph, as we remember is not. As a step parent myself, I understand the dynamic at work here. Steps do not always have the latitude or luxury of reacting to a situation of discipline. There is a rhythm that develops between parent and child and as a step that rhythm has to be learned. Joseph is quiet, waiting, watching, learning.

The exchange is between Mary and Jesus. She displays the appropriate parental concern and she listens to the boy's response. It is important to note here that Jesus is a boy. He is 12. According to Hebrew tradition, the age of manhood (bar-mitzvah) is 13. Next year he has some latitude, not this year. The

boy responds not as we might have at first suspected. His tone is not that of snot nosed kid. We read it again and we hear it more like, "Mom, don't you remember that conversation you and dad (God) had before I was born? I do! I was there! I know!" "I am about my father's business. This is where I am supposed to be." At that point we can be reminded of Luke Chapter 1 where Mary learns about the child. We no longer hear Jesus as an impertinent child, but rather as one who has raised an important question. "Did you not know?"

Of all the questions we might ask of this passage, I believe this is the one God wants us most to understand today, this Sunday after Christmas. On Monday night at Christmas Candlelight Service we heard the story of the birth of a child. The angel who has been preparing the world for this birth suddenly appears to a group of unlikely messengers. The shepherds, afraid though they are, still seek out the events that are described to them and when they find the baby in the manger they know! Once they know, their next act is to witness. They witness to those gathered at the stable, then they return to their fields witnessing to all to whom they come in contact with.

Today, on the Sunday after Christmas, is there any group of people less likely than the shepherds to hear this story and bear witness? Yes! There is!... us! Today, 2 thousand years after the event, the story seems like a nice to hear fairy tale about a nice young couple who find themselves in a difficult situation and successfully navigate their way through it! We are so far removed from the event that we cannot travel back to Bethlehem to see first hand all that God had made known to us, yet we too are called to witness! How can we witness if we cannot verify the truth of the event! How can we know?

This realization brings us to our *Spiritual Cliff*. If there is an event more in the news this week than Christmas, it is the plight of our country's leaders as they face the "Fiscal Cliff." The picture they paint is of all of us being pushed out to the edge of a steep cliff where we are about to be pushed over the edge into a free fall to an ending from which there can be no return. Our leaders are painting a picture for us of our nation as being unable to overcome the impending disaster that is our current financial challenge!

Once again, the world we live in paints a picture that is completely upside down from the picture God wants to paint. Instead of thinking, as leadership in the United States thinks that we are a lackluster and incapable people, God invites us to think as if we are an inspired and chosen people who, by His Grace, can overcome any obstacle. (Phil. 4: 13) God invites us today to recognize that we do not come to a cliff from the top. We come to a cliff from the bottom. From the bottom, we are invited to work together to climb up, to scale to new heights and to recognize that God is in our midst as we aspire to even greater success than we have experienced in the past.

Instead of facing our challenges with fear, we can face them with confidence knowing that God is directing our efforts for the building of His kingdom. The only way we can be successful in this endeavor however is to know! That knowledge is our spiritual cliff. How can we know? If only there were a way we could go back to Bethlehem and see the event so we could be sure. If only there were some documentation that would clear up our questions without any doubt. Jesus asks the question, "Do you not know?"

How can we know that this story is true? What kind of source do we have today that will tell us for sure? This is not just some intellectual exercise. Our kids are asking! They want to know if the story is true. It is no longer enough that we tell them to accept this story because we said so. There are sources on the internet that they all have access to that will tell them the story cannot be true and will tell them why. Additionally there are non-believers who want more than they have. They see what we have as Christians and they want to know how they can have it. When they come to us, we need to have an answer! Jesus asks, "Do you not know?" He asks because we are supposed to know and so we must climb the spiritual cliff.

The tools we use must be the best. Our climb is going to be steep. So what is our best tool? The source we have that is best suited for this climb is the Bible. Non-believers will question the source so we must have some explanation for them as to why this is the best. We can say that it is the inspired word of God, that it has been handed down by the prophets who received it directly from God. All of that is sufficient for us as believers but for others there is skepticism. We must have more of a reason for claiming the Bible as our tool, as our source of information about what we should know.

We can claim that the Bible is the truth! The truth means that it is authentic to the original. How can we back this claim. Well...most people would agree that Homer's *The Illiad* is one of the most widely read books in human history. It has been preserved through the ages and is still taught in many of our classrooms today as a classic of world literature. For all the care in preserving this work, there are only 644 original manuscripts in existence today. That may seem like a lot, but the number pales by comparison to the original manuscripts of the Bible still in existence. There are over 25,000 original manuscripts of the Bible preserved in original language in existence today! No other work in all of human existence has been so carefully and completely preserved. If we were to lose all of the printed Bibles in all of our bookstores in this moment, we would from the original manuscripts be able to re-create all but 10 or so verses! The Bible is the source of authority for us because for generations, others have witnessed from it and believed in it in such significant ways as to preserve it for us to learn from today as truth!

There are other ways we can demonstrate the truth of scripture, but for the sake of time this morning, I will stop with just this one. And the non-believer, or the new Christian will say, so the story is in the Bible. It could still be made up, or it could be a fake, or it could be a coincidence! How do we respond to that. We respond by noting that the story of Jesus birth was foretold over 500 years before the birth. It was told in great detail. This detail is enough to give validity to our claim. Fulfillment of prophesy in scripture is not coincidence. It is part of God's plan. Fulfillment of even one prophesy is against all odds. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus fulfilled over 300. There can be no argument of coincidence in this. To fulfill 8 prophesies the odds are 10 to the 19th power. You could sit and count starting now and in one billion years you would still be counting to reach that number if you count one number per second! When Jesus asks "Do you not know," he is inviting us to go back and examine the evidence that points directly at his being born for our salvation!

Armed with our tools, let's begin to climb the *Spiritual Cliff*. The first small step we take, we take together. God foretold that the promised one would be born of the "seed of a woman." (Gen. 3: 15) In

every other prophesy of birth in the Bible, the birth is announced through the seed of the man. The messiah is to come through the seed of the woman. Second, all human beings trace their origin from the sons of Noah. After the flood the three sons of Noah repopulated the world. God spoke of His Messiah coming from the seed of Shem.(Gen. 9: 26-27) The line then continues from Shem to Abraham. (Gen. 12: 1-3) Now, Abraham had many sons, but only one with Sarah. When he was 99 years old and Sarah was ninety, they conceived the child Isaac. It is through this impossible union, one only available through the power of God that God's Messiah would come. (Gen. 26: 3-4) Isaac had two sons, Esau and Jacob. God chose Jacob as the one through whom the line would come. (Gen. 35: 11-12) Jacob had 12 sons. They are called the 12 tribes of Israel. The Messiah could have come from any of them, but God continues to reveal the fullness of his plan and he reveals that the chosen one would come from the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49: 10) through the line of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1) and from the house and lineage of David! (2Sam. 7: 12) Jesse had 8 sons and this prophecy God eliminates 7/8ths of them continuing to narrow the options and make unmistakable the true origin of Messiah.

We have made the claim that the Bible is true, therefore if even one element of it is false, the entire claim we make is false. God offers the fullness of this prophecy in complete detail so that we might know. Jesus comes from the seed of a woman, through the line of Shem through the promise to Abraham through the fulfillment of Isaac through the younger brother Jacob through the unlikely recovery of Judah through the root of the stump of Jesse through the youngest son David. The likelihood that these 8 prophecies could be fulfilled in just one person is 10 to the 19th power, a number greater than the number of sands on the seashore! God, however does not stop there. He reveals where the birth will take place (Micah 5: 2) and the time as being before the destruction of the temple. (Daniel 9: 26)

God has gone to great lengths to record over 500 years before the birth of Jesus that this would be the one. When Jesus asks Mary, he asks all of us, "Do you not know?" In Luke 24 in the story of the "Road to Emmaus" Jesus asks his fellow travelers, do you not know that everything written about me in scripture must be fulfilled" God's authenticity must be preserved! God is the original. There is only one who is like Him and God has revealed this one in the scriptures so that we may know! So that when we hear the story of the Joseph traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem with a woman who is pregnant with a child who is not his and that she gives birth there to a child and the angels appear to shepherds keeping watch in the fields revealing the "Good News" we can rejoice with them! So that when the shepherds go to Bethlehem, (In Hebrew the city of bread) and they find there the baby lying in the manger just as it is told to them they can fall down and feast on the fullness of God come into a world hungry for hope! So that as the shepherds leave the city praising and giving glory to God, witnessing to all of all they have seen and all they have heard and all that has been made known to them, we can recognize that it has now been made known to us!

When Jesus asks the question, we can now say with full confidence that "Yes! We do know!" Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God who will save us from our sins! It is true, we can prove it, we can know it and we, like the shepherds can share it! With Mary, we can ponder all these things in our hearts and we can once again believe at Christmas! This is the Good News! When our children ask the question we can

tell them! When our non-believing friends ask the question, we can tell them! God has given us the facts. We can lay it out for them so that they too may come to believe.

All this evidence is presented for us and it is incontrovertible! It cannot be denied! It must be true because to believe it is coincidence would be to believe that coincidence and random chance have validity as the creation story. We have a responsibility to know this truth and to bear witness to it. When people want to know why we want prayer in our schools or in our lives, when people want to know why we want the "Ten Commandments" near the courthouse as a reminder of what we believe, we need to be able to give them a truthful and complete answer. The Bible provides that answer and we can know!

Having spent about 20 minutes sharing this information with you however, I must now tell you that all this knowledge is not the reason I believe in Jesus, the Messiah! In Church on Sunday I am wearing a tie that shows the travels of the wise men. I will be wearing it again next Sunday as we celebrate the arrival of the wise men. The words printed on the tie are, "Wise Men Still Seek Him." We can be wise in the words of God and seek him in truth and God will reveal himself to us. We have seen that this morning, however God has made Himself known to me not only through the words, but through His presence!

I have another tie in Church today. On this tie are printed the words "Footprints in the Sand." Many of you know this story. When we look back on our life there are times as we look at the beach upon which we have traveled that we see two sets of footprints. We know that during these times God is with us. There are other times, the difficult times of our lives where we see only one set of footprints. When we ask God why there is only one set of prints during the difficult times, we want to know why God has left us during these times and God's answer is that God does not leave us in those times, rather in those difficult times, the one set of footprints are Gods. These are the times God carries us! I believe in the truth of God's story at Christmas because I know that in the difficult times of my life, God has carried me! I have also been with many of you in some of the most difficult times of your lives. I have watched as you struggled with worldly issues only to be amazed at God's grace and power in your lives. Your faithful witness is why I believe! Your faithful witness has helped me climb the "Spiritual Cliff."

I have a third tie in church today. All three of these ties were give me by members of our congregation this year for Christmas. This third tie reminds me of God's promise, not just to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob but to me. On this tie are printed the words, "He will raise you up and renew your strength and you will run and not be weary! You will walk and not faint! You will soar as on the wings of Eagles!" (Isaiah 40: 31) I believe because I know a God who is greater than all the forces of the world and that this God will overcome any obstacles that might be in the way of the building of His kingdom!

As we ascend the spiritual cliff, we walk, we climb together. We can climb with confidence knowing God gives us strength. We can know together that our best days are still ahead of us! We are not looking down at a precipice of disaster. We are looking up at an ascent to new heights! We are climbing toward a new promise filled with purpose and passion and possibility that we might have never imagined! We are filled with the knowledge of truth that God has given us and we are inspired to share that "Good News" because in the difficulty of our climb we experience the power of God!

Those who face the fiscal cliff this week should look beyond the depths of despair that they are delivering through the media, and look instead at the possibilities that exist in the power of God! We are not facing a fiscal cliff! We are climbing a spiritual one that allows us to look up and draw our strength from the Lord! Our best days are ahead because God has given us an incredible gift at Christmas Time! He has made known to us a savior who will be called wonderful counselor, mighty God Prince of Peace! We need not fear as we climb but we must bear witness that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us! Our climb is just begun! Our best days are ahead! Amen!